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ABSTRACT

This digest addresses factors that may influence college completion and academic success for Hispanic students, particularly Mexican American students, enrolled in community college and four-year institutions. Recent research suggests that institutional practices in high schools have much to do with the low postsecondary participation rates of minority group students. Several innovative projects to counter such influences include community-based group tutorials and "untracking" of low- and high-achieving students. A number of barriers and problems reduce Hispanic rates of transfer from two- to four-year institutions and of four-year college completion. Suggestions to help students overcome alienation and other problems include support systems, guidance and counseling, minority group organizations and cultural centers, high involvement in both social and academic life, and favorable relationships with faculty and advisers. Other related issues are the importance of financial aid for Hispanic students, the higher educational attainment of Hispanic women versus Hispanic men, the benefits of Hispanic cultural elements and Spanish-language materials in the college curriculum, and research needs. (Contains 20 references.) (SV)

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FACILITATING POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES FOR MEXICAN AMERICANS

by Judith LeBlanc Flores

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Facilitating Postsecondary Outcomes for Mexican Americans

by Judith LeBlanc Flores

ERIC DIGEST

Postsecondary outcomes for Mexican Americans have not improved measurably since the mid-1980s. Although Hispanic students are attending and graduating from college in greater numbers, much of this growth is linked directly to their population growth. Despite increased representation among undergraduates and college graduates, Hispanic students complete college at a lower rate than the general student population: 41 percent of 4-year institutions' Hispanic entrants graduate, compared with 54 percent of all entrants (Carter & Wilson, 1993).

This digest will address those factors that may facilitate postsecondary outcomes for Hispanic students, particularly Mexican-American students, who enroll in U.S. community colleges and 4-year institutions. Factors examined include preparation for college; transfer from community colleges to 4-year colleges; retention and completion of 4-year degrees; financial aid; and gender, culture, and language issues.

Preparation for College

Recent research (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990; Rendon & Nora, 1988) suggests that institutional practices have much to do with minorities' lack of postsecondary participation: employing differential tracking; channeling minority students away from activities that foster inquiry and creative thinking skills; segregating them into minority schools; and failing to provide a support system or counselors and teachers with whom students can identify.

Other research has looked for ways to address these problems. Sosa (1990) reported on several innovative community projects, including group tutorials and parent-school partnerships, that promote academic achievement and aid Hispanics in preparing for college. Mehan and Villanueva (1993) reported on an untracking experiment involving 253 students in 14 high schools in the San Diego Schools system. Low- and high-achieving students were placed in the same rigorous academic program for the college bound, for 3 years. Among the Latino students involved in the experimental program, 44 percent enrolled in 4-year colleges.

Even among those who complete high school, many students do not realize they are capable of earning bachelor's degrees (Rendon, Justiz, & Resta, 1988). This circumstance suggests that college recruiters should seek out and encourage high school students who have not considered attending college (Valdivieso, 1990).

Community College Articulation on Transfer with 4-Year Institutions

Of the Hispanic students who go on to postsecondary education, most enroll in two-year institutions. For most Americans, however, the educational gateway to opportunity is a 4-year college degree. Although there is little documentation on the effects of community college attendance in terms of educational outcomes and long-term economic returns, one statistic seems significant: Transfer rates often fall lower than 10 percent for minority students (Rendon & Nora, 1988). A comprehensive study of community colleges with large Hispanic enrollments in Texas, Arizona, and California (Rendon, Justiz & Resta, 1988) revealed a number of barriers for students in the transfer process: (a) unfamiliarity with the costs/benefits of the higher education system; (b) unwillingness to leave community and families; (c) difficulty meeting timelines; (d) lack of family involvement in education; (e) having to work to help the family survive; (f) not knowing they were capable of earning degrees; (g) not understanding the consequences of changing programs; (h) financial pressures; (i) minimal faculty-student interaction; and (j) weak community college articulation with senior institutions, both in terms of exchanging data about transfer students and comparing curriculum and expectations.

Communication problems abound. Turner (1988) noted that the part-time and transitory nature of commuting students poses difficulties in making students aware of opportunities and resources. College catalogs alone are often a poor source of information for students faced with multiple barriers at senior institutions: application paperwork, tuition and moving costs, assessment policies, space limitations in required courses, and variations in university general education requirements (Rendon & Nora, 1988).

Retention and 4-Year College Completion

Fiske's (1988) survey of the undergraduate Hispanic experience at 10 universities across the nation suggests that for many Hispanic students the most serious problems are not those they confront getting into college, but those they face once they get there. The problems range from the anxiety of breaking close family ties to the loneliness and tensions inherent in finding their way in large, impersonal, fast-paced institutions. Students often feel alienated, discouraged, and overwhelmed.

To help students overcome such problems, inquiries by Fiske (1988), Carter and Wilson (1993), Rendon and Nora (1988) and Valdivieso (1990) suggest students need (a) adequate support systems; (b) encouragement, guidance, and counseling; (c) ethnic minority organizations and cultural service centers; (d) high levels of involvement in college life; and (e) favorable relationships with faculty members and academic advisors.

Based on Tinto's (1987) Student Attrition Model, Nora (1987a) studied Chicano students enrolled part-time or full-time in three community colleges in southern Texas with large Hispanic populations, and Flores (1989) studied Hispanics (mostly Mexican Americans) enrolled full-time at two comprehensive universities in Oklahoma. Both found that Mexican-American students who made better grades and received more precollege encouragement tended to earn some form of credential. In Flores' study, Hispanic-American students who were competent members of *both* the social and academic communities tended to persist to degree completion.

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Financial Aid

Finances and financial aid are first-order concerns of minority students (Cibik & Chambers, 1991). Fields (1988) reported on Hispanic-origin students nationwide and found that "expanded financial aid, better information about it, and simplified financial aid processing were among the most important things the campus might do to help them remain in college" (p. 25). This finding is supported by Nora (1987b), who reported that Hispanic community college students who received high levels of noncampus and campus-based financial aid were enrolled in more semesters, earned more semester hours, earned high grade point averages, and received some form of college credential.

Hispanic Women and the Gender Gap

The gender gap currently seems to favor Hispanic women. Carter and Wilson (1993) report that the gender gap in high school completion continues to be largest among Hispanics—52 percent of the men graduated in 1992, compared to 62.8 percent of the women. Between 1991-1992, Hispanic women also earned a larger increase than Hispanic men in associate degrees (13.7 percent vs. 3.5 percent), bachelor's degrees (14.2 percent vs. 8.1 percent), master's degrees (8 percent vs. 2.2 percent), and first professional degrees (4.5 percent vs. 3.9 percent) (pp. 16-17).

Of the 200 Chicano women students from the University of Texas-El Paso in Young's (1992) study, 47 percent were majoring in fields traditionally dominated by men (e.g., business, engineering, natural sciences) (p. 348). The increase in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanics in engineering is almost entirely from women's achievement and has tripled since 1981 (Carter & Wilson, 1993).

Despite gains, Mexican-American women still face many obstacles: financial constraints, the number of hours per week spent on the job, limited family support or family opposition, difficulty with studies or too little time to study, and interruptions to attend to family matters at home (Young, 1992).

Cultural Heritage and Language

"General education program curricula rarely reflects Hispanic interests or Latino culture" (Fiske, 1988, p. 30). Yet Hispanic-American students who completed their degrees at the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University were more likely to have a balanced bicultural orientation and retain the Spanish language (Flores, 1989; 1992). Not long ago, being a native Spanish speaker was viewed as a deficit. Now, as Garcia's (1992) review found, being bilingual is seen by many educators as linguistic enrichment with possible cognitive advantages.

Young (1992) noted that 40 percent of the Chicano students at the University of Texas-El Paso think it is important that the college curriculum contain material about the heritage of Mexican Americans, and 65 percent reported they speak Spanish well. With the rise of Hispanic enrollment, some colleges and universities offer Spanish language courses for native speakers (Collison, 1994) and at Kean College, for example, the combination of Spanish-speaking programs (SSP) and ESL provides a dual track to academic success. "While Spanish-speaking students enroll in ESL courses in order to develop their English proficiency, they simultaneously earn college credit by taking general education courses taught in Spanish through SSP" (Rosenthal, 1990, p. 26).

Recommendations for Facilitating Outcomes

Research, as outlined above, has pointed to some important factors that can affect postsecondary outcomes for Mexican-American and other minority students. To further facilitate outcomes, there is a need to examine (a) regional differences and similarities among Mexican-American and other Hispanic student populations, (b) steps taken by states and institutions to promote precollege academic progress and community college transfers to 4-year institutions, (c) gender gap issues, (d) the influence of culture and language on college achievement, and (e) ways to provide financial aid that encourage increased on-campus interaction and full attention to studies.

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